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## A BRIEF FOR FRENCH IN THE HIGH SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>

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According to current educational theory, at least one foreign language is indispensable in a high-school course, and where a modern foreign language is called for, the choice in many cases may properly fall to French. While the position of French in the secondary-school program is thus theoretically secure, the introduction or extension of French is meeting with several serious obstacles. The first of these is that abstract estimates as to the value of this or that language have very little weight in comparison with the practical consideration: Is the subject well taught? The educational world is ready to intrust greater responsibility to teachers of French whenever and wherever they prove by results that they stand for an instruction as serious and effective as any of the language subjects. Improvement in the professional training of our teachers is therefore the most important practical problem that confronts us.

A second formidable obstacle to our progress is that parents and principals, and often teachers, are not alive to the possibilities of French as a school subject, that they generally underrate its value, and that as a consequence, a majority of the schools and colleges of the Mississippi valley are stinting the outlay for salaries and the time allotment, and so are not giving French a fair chance to show what it can do.

Both for principals and for teachers the main question is: How much can teachers of French aid in the work of making high-school boys and girls more intelligent, active, and presentable members of society? What follows is an attempt to answer this fundamental question.

In the important matters of good health and good morals our responsibility is relatively small—we are rather expected to do our

<sup>1</sup> Read November 12, 1904, at the annual conference of teachers of Romance languages in colleges and schools in relations with the University of Chicago.

pupil three services: first, to give him the key to a foreign language which for various reasons occupies a distinguished position in the modern world; second, to train and develop his mental faculties; third, to increase his power to do steady and effective work. We may vary somewhat as to the degree of weight that we attach to each of these three divisions of the instruction, but it seems certain that none of them may be safely neglected.

Our pupil is first confronted with a foreign system of sounds, remarkably simple and definite, yet requiring of the learner close attention and assiduous practice. That it is a hard proposition to most young people is proved by the fact that so few really succeed. Success would be more general if our classes were limited to fifteen, and if the purely physiological problems involved were not so generally ignored. After learning the sounds, the pupil is exercised in observing, distinguishing, and remembering the forms of a language, in which the divergences from his mother-tongue are considerable.<sup>1</sup> While we may freely concede to our critics that the educational value of learning to speak another tongue is not high, yet it certainly contributes to self-confidence, to alertness and sureness of ear and memory, and to the merit of a clear enunciation.

All this concerns the study of the spoken tongue. But French is also a highly developed literary language (as we may clumsily translate the German word *Schriftsprache*), with a rich vocabulary of general and abstract terms. Perhaps two-thirds of the English vocabulary is of Latin origin; the French vocabulary is nine-tenths Latin. Commissioner Harris recently reminded us that "the English language resorts to Latin and Greek for all those terms which express fine distinctions of thought or subtle shades of sentiment," so that "a little study of Latin enables the English thinker to use with certainty and precision the words which express the results of careful thinking."<sup>2</sup> It has escaped observation that the great majority of our Latin words have come to us from the French, as their suffixes

<sup>1</sup> Notably in the use and non-use of articles, a new and thorough-going system of gender-distinction, a different mode of negation and of interrogation, a different order of pronouns, a rather complex verbal system, and finally a wealth of idiomatic turns and expressions which have no exact equivalents in English.

<sup>2</sup> *Educational Review*, April, 1899, pp. 314, 315.

show, and that therefore it is some or all of the French connotations that we have borrowed, and not those of the more remote classic Latin. Besides, there are large numbers of Latin words in English whose cognates are in use in the modern Romance tongues, but were entirely unknown to the classic writers.<sup>1</sup> If, then, it be a question of enlarging and sifting the pupil's English vocabulary by means of language exercises which, as Lowell well described them, shall "compel us to such a choosing and testing, to such a nice discrimination . . . of shades of meaning, that we now first learn the secret of the words we have been using or misusing all our lives," it would seem that the availability of French for this purpose is at least equal to that of Latin, although this aspect of the matter has been so generally overlooked.

If we incline to the pedagogical theory which seeks "mental discipline through knowledge," we do not need to be reminded that the French nation has made important, and in some cases unique, contributions to human civilization, and that France continues to be one of the focuses of the world's intensest activities. When our boy has been brought to appreciate these facts in some of their many bearings, when the salient features of French life, past and present, have been made real and living to him, his mind has been stimulated and broadened. For life is the great educator, and the best French life, while not lacking in moral and material successes, is particularly rich in intellectual and artistic triumphs, many of which are not beyond the ken of wide-awake young people. Moreover, French civilization is unusually accessible and intelligible, and yet in most ways—being essentially Latin—widely different from our own. Few, I believe, will agree with those who think that French life is too similar to American life to be stimulating and educative. One is compelled to believe that such an opinion, wherever held, must be due to an imperfect acquaintance with French history and French character.

<sup>1</sup> Opening at random Mérimée's *Colomba*, a text much read in high schools, I find on one page seven Latin loan-words; to these the English cognates are "conversation," "quality," "notability," "society," "curiosity," "intention," "satellite." It may be a surprise to some to find that the only one of the etyma of these much-used words that is used by Cæsar (*D. B. G.*) or Virgil (*Æneid*) is *societas*, which occurs in Cæsar in the sense of "alliance," an unmodern meaning. The whole subject deserves a thorough investigation.

When therefore, as often happens, the well-known fact is brought to our notice that the essentials of French grammar, such as they appear in the secondary-school textbook, are sooner mastered than the German or Latin rudiment, this state of things may be regarded not as a drawback, but as an advantage. We congratulate the pupil that he is sooner able to read, and that, with the same effort, he may read more literature and learn more about the foreign life than his classmate may in Latin or German. It is simply a piece of good fortune that the wealth of the mine lies nearer the surface, and that the returns on the investment are quicker.

As to French institutions, our teaching, it must be admitted, is as yet fragmentary and unsystematic; we are only beginning to utilize the interest which the natural boy and girl feel in foreign life, in the "works and days" of other peoples. But while we are still waiting for the special textbooks which are to give us, in artistic form and living color, characteristic scenes from the French national life of today, this lack is not much felt in the high school, where the study of *realia* may be limited to what is suggested by the literary text.

After all is said, French literature, alive as it is with the subtle and contagious forces of personality, remains the most effective interpreter of French life. And what a literature! Unsurpassed in range and high average of excellence, it lies ready to hand, the refined product of centuries of uninterrupted tradition. Why should not this noble creation of the human mind be utilized everywhere in secondary education?

Let us see, first of all, what will be the rewards of such a study.

"The object of literature in education," said Cardinal Newman, "is to open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to comprehend and digest its own knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, address, and expression." The power of any great literature to awaken and train the mind could hardly be more justly estimated. But for our present purpose we must go farther and ask whether or not French literature possesses any qualities of its own—I mean qualities which it possesses to a really pre-eminent degree—which enable it to make a unique contribution to the work of education. What special services can it do the boy of fifteen or sixteen?

I venture to name three qualities for which French literature as a whole is pre-eminent—robust common-sense, wide human sympathy, and good taste; or, in other words, French literature is pre-eminently clear and sensible in thought, fraternal in spirit, and artistic in form.

French writers have the conspicuous merit of being uniformly clear, frank, and sensible in thought and expression; they do not indulge in “gushing,” in clouds of words, nor in attempts to excite the feelings to vague exaltations. They seem to have taken to heart Molière’s lesson: “Keep your head, and a will be well.” So fundamental and pervasive is their intellectual conscience that every page of good literature assimilated, every linguistic exercise based on a classic model, is a lesson, not only in the discrimination of language forms, but also in the practice of clear and straightforward thinking. Our high-school graduate will be called upon to write—it may be newspaper paragraphs, business letters, advertisements, or what not—but no matter what he writes, this training will enable him to think and to express himself more readily and to the point.

Again, French literature is pre-eminently social. It “expresses truths of interest to everybody in a language which all understand,” as M. Brunetière has said. This quality of universal acceptability has more than once carried the national literature beyond the borders of France; for us it is an important quality, for, thanks to it, even backward pupils need not fail to understand and profit. Especially significant for our purposes, however, is the penetrating and delicate analysis of social motives and relationships which this literature reveals, and which is without a parallel in other literatures, because, as Taine said, the French have a special talent for social intercourse—a special talent for usages whose purpose is to make human intercourse easier, more agreeable and profitable.

Of course, no one believes that the study of a French text will inevitably inspire consideration and tact, but rudeness is oftener the result of thoughtlessness than of intention, and there are plenty of boys of dull imagination who seem incapable of realizing unfamiliar situations, and to whom much that polite society has accepted as essential is apt to seem absurd, if not preposterous. For such, no exercise is more useful than to be set to unravel the motives of the

actors in the French *comédie de mœurs*. Let us take, for example, Professor Benton's excellent trio of modern plays.<sup>1</sup> The boy of sixteen or seventeen who has been led to the point where he appreciates all the motives of all the characters in this one volume will be more of a person than he was before, because *he will see more in life than he saw before*.

In addition to intellectual probity and the spirit of mutual toleration, French literature, as all know, has a conspicuously artistic form. It has profited by the same talents that have made the French so successful in the arts of painting, sculpture, design, and decoration. As the collective product of a society of more solidarity than our own, the language of France has been molded by generations of acute minds to all the finer uses of conversation and written expression, until we have today—to use Walter Bagehot's phrase—"a veritable treasury of dexterous felicities." Even granted that French style has no charms for these young people, it is still something to have introduced them to a literature so distinguished for good taste, and to one which may become to them, as to many others, a resource and a consolation in after-life.

To resume: If our pupil has been successfully taught for three or four years, and granted some aptitude for language studies, at the end of the period, besides a fair command of spoken French, he has gained notably in self-possession, in alertness and exactness of speech and thought, in ability to understand unfamiliar social conditions, and finally in general knowledge and appreciation of the possibilities of life. The total result will do much to commend the graduate to employers as well as to society in general.

To secure these results, and so to use the instruction meantime as to increase the boy's power of concentration, are practical problems which challenge the energies of the enthusiastic teacher. Some have thought to win respect for the study by treating French as though it were Latin. This is now seen to have been a mistake; for French in the high school has certain functions of its own, not only those which belong to a living tongue and a modern civilization of the first rank, but also some whose basis is the high development of French social life and certain excellences of French literary art.

<sup>1</sup> *Easy French Plays: La grammaire, La joie fait peur, Les doigts de jée* (Chicago,

Is the literature we are thus proposing to use morally wholesome in its influence? If we might understand the term "moral writer" in the same way as Cardinal Newman when he spoke of Shakespeare and Homer as "religious poets"—the former exhibiting "the characteristics of an unlearned and undisciplined piety," the latter "the religion of nature and conscience"—it would be easy to show that French literature, as a whole, is morally sound, if not morally earnest. But there are some who insist on much narrower definitions of "moral." In some quarters there is an ill-defined fear that young people in learning French run some risk of moral contagion, of receiving lessons in irreverence, flippancy, or indelicacy in the relations of the sexes. For high-school education the question may hardly be said to be a practical one, for, so far as I know, no texts have ever been used in French instruction anywhere which might stimulate irreverence or indelicacy. Nor is it likely that any such texts will ever be used, inasmuch as such literature is in truth not representative of the French nation.

But the whole subject of the moral influence of French literature has another, and perhaps a more important, aspect. We know that the French conceptions of moral good are easily confused with what is sensible or reasonable, or—as in the case of Goethe and Ruskin—with what is beautiful. Aside from these interpretations, Frenchmen are apt to understand goodness as sympathetic fellow-feeling. Now, is it not true, as M. Fouillée has recently asserted,<sup>1</sup> that at the present time morals are taking on more and more the sociological aspect, so that virtues formerly preached for their own sake—that is, for the benefit to the individual—are now advocated for their social and humanitarian importance? If so, it may well be a question whether in interpreting morals as reasonable and fraternal conduct, France is not, as so often in the past, pointing out the way of social progress.

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#### CONFERENCE OF THE ROMANCE DEPARTMENT

As introductory to his paper on "The Value of French in the High School," Associate Professor Jenkins expressed his belief that the indications are that teachers of French are to be called upon in

<sup>1</sup> *La France au point de vue morale* (Paris, 1900).